



**HARBOR-UCLA
PEDIATRICS**

Compassionate Advice from a Pediatrician Mom Regarding Screen Use

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“Don’t they know how damaging screens are to their kid’s development? Why would they do that?” I used to secretly judge parents who allowed their kids to play on I-pads while eating at a restaurant. The negative impact of screen use on a child’s physical health, emotional and language development is well studied. It can hinder human interactions and family bonding. I could not help but think that they were making the wrong choice for their kids.

It was not until last month, when I had the chance to vacation from work and step into full-time motherhood that I gained a new perspective on screens. My husband, Nate, and I brought our son, Ethan, to Taiwan to visit family for the first time. After strict quarantine for 14 days, we were excited to take Ethan to explore our hometown.

An enthusiastic 21-month-old surely does not like to stay seated in strollers amidst new sights and experiences. Ethan made us play “chase” down a crowded aisle! As the excitement wore him out, he began to whine incessantly, and just wanted to be held. Exhausted, Nate and I surrendered and handed him a video. He immediately calmed down and sat quietly in his stroller. As we finally began to enjoy the peaceful walk, a middle-aged lady walked by and said, “Wow, how could you let a kid this young watch a screen already!” I forced myself to look at her politely with a fake smile and said, “yeah,” attempting to end the conversation.



What I really wanted to say was:

“I am a pediatrician, do you think I wouldn’t know how bad this screen is for my child?”

“If I could choose, why would I give him the screen?”

“All I want to do is get home and put him in bed. Can’t you see that I am sweaty, half dead, and going crazy?”

“And, it’s absolutely none of your business!!!!”

After arriving home, I began to smile – realizing that just now – I was one of “those” moms. And I used to BE that middle-aged lady to other poor parents just trying to survive. Since becoming a mom, I have experienced many “Aha” moments like this, changing my practice as a pediatrician. I have learned to be more compassionate and mindful when counseling parent about what “should” or “should not” be done.

So here is my advice on screens – parent to parent:

1) Attempt other soothing methods first. Avoid using media as the first and only way to calm a child.

During the rest of our trip, Nate and I continued using media to ‘manage’ Ethan to get things done. I can see how easily we can begin lowering our threshold for screen use and rely on it more and more to help calm our child.

Instead, try to talk, play interactive games, or read to your child first if possible. Keep your bag stocked with a favorite toy or book. Take your child to the library to select new books. Children who have experienced the joy of reading with parents will explore and even “read” books on their own for a bit.

2) Beware: It's hard work to decrease screen use once introduced.

After our vacation, we avoided screens for a week in Ethan's presence and consistently distracted him in order to overcome his 'screen addiction' developed while travelling.

Introducing screen use should be a planned decision. Sit down with all the people who care for your child (e.g. grandparents, babysitters, etc.) and developed a media use plan. For example, protecting meals and sleep times, or setting a media-free zone. Set limits that everyone can honor to avoid your kid from taking advantage of loopholes to get more screen time with permissive caregivers. Don't be afraid to communicate the plan with any new caregiver. There were many instances when Nate and I had to politely ask our parents to stop showing videos to Ethan on their phones.

3) Be mindful of how you use media – for positive benefits/learning or default babysitter.

Constantly reflect: "Am I using the screen as a babysitter?" "Do I need other childcare support?"

Media use can be positive such as video chatting with far-away family members to build connections or learning from educational or high-quality programming. But be mindful not to use it as a default babysitter. Try to seek and accept help from others if needed to provide you with some 'me time.' Set up playdates or babysitting coops where different families take turns caring for each other's kids so you can take turns relaxing a little or enjoy "date nights," etc.

4) Your children are watching you.

Actions speak a thousand words. You are the role model for your kids. It is hard to expect a child to follow the media use plan if everyone else in the family is always on the phone or watching television. Instead, use it when they are sleeping or at school if needed.

5) Give yourself much grace.

Your young child will not suffer permanent brain damage by watching a video for 30 minutes just so you can take a mental break. Your own self-care is important in creating a healthy relationship with your child and better for brain development in the long run!